

## 20. Charisma and Toxins

Suddenly feeling nervous and restless, Wyl shifted uneasily in his chair and noticed a service table near the window with brown bottles of beer on ice then after selecting a bottle, he lingered staring out a window. Convinced by a quick glance toward the council still involved in talk of battle and strategy that they would never notice his absence, Wyl slipped out the door onto a cozy stone courtyard surrounded by a low wing wall that on the outside, dropped off sharply into a steep wooded ravine. Light and dark pastel shades in rays of sunshine slanted low through the trees onto the stone deck of the courtyard while bare branches and pine boughs rustled in the breeze. Wyl inhaled cool fresh air in deep breaths then sat on the low wall nursing his bottle of beer and expelling all thoughts. The clinking and creaking of the door attracted his attention and Wyl glanced up somewhat surprised to observe Reneta close the door behind her.

“Hi.” Wyl said with a polite smile.

Approaching swiftly then sitting next to him on the wall, Reneta extended her hand in a fashion indicating she wished to share the beer. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember your name.” she confessed as she turned her back to the door and drank from the bottle.

“Wyl.” he stated then elaborated, “Actually, I’m not sure I was introduced... I’m not very significant. I’m just an apprentice and probably would have been instructed not to attend if I were just a little more noticeable.” Reneta smiled warmly and after a moment of awkward silence, Wyl said, “I’m sorry for your loss... your father.” Reneta nodded appreciatively then Wyl asked, “What about your mother?”

“She died... five years ago? Six?” Reneta replied.

“I’m sorry.” Wyl again consoled, “I can’t imagine how difficult that must be.”

“It is more difficult for my brother. He is younger and enjoys the additional punishment of his title as King.” Reneta stated with apparent sarcasm, “I understand Ollis and Tanek are trying to fulfill their duty but they won’t do anything without his approval. He’s not a baby, but he’s just not mature enough to make an informed responsible decision, and he knows it. They know it. We all know it but they can’t talk to me alone. It wouldn’t be proper ‘protocol’. So we sit him down, me on one side, Ollis and Tanek on the other, and we talk to each other while my brother obscures our views, and we pretend that equals him fulfilling the role of King.”

Wyl considered for a moment then asked, “-so, does that mean you’re the Queen?”

With a smile near laughter, Reneta informed him, “No, I am not the Queen. I am a mere personal advisor to my brother. Most consider me his sinister puppet master lurking behind the curtain but mere personal advisor nonetheless. Regardless of his immaturity, boys first, oldest to youngest, then girls. That’s the tradition.”

“It sounds-” Wyl commenced then paused reluctant to appear judgmental.

“-Stupid? Arbitrary? Illogical?” Reneta responded completing the thought.

“Well,” Wyl equivocated, “I don’t know I would go so far as-”

“-You would also like to pretend then?” Reneta inquired.

“I don’t want to be disrespectful.” explained Wyl.

Acknowledging his courtesy, Reneta paused and inquired, “Don’t you have a King?”

“Well, Glendwyn is our Martial.” Wyl replied.

“-so, he’s like a King?” Reneta speculated.

“Um,” Wyl struggled to answer then said, “I guess I’m not sure what a king is, really.”

Raising her eyebrows somewhat astonished then attempting to conceal her reaction, Reneta inquired, “You observed what I did in there, right?”

“Well, we have lots of people who-” Wyl hesitated for a moment to choose his words sensitively then settled on, “-argue and... assume responsibility.”

Reneta smiled discreetly and remarked, “You have a curious innocence, and very good manners. We need to talk. I am curious about things.”

“I’ll trade.” Wyl suggested.

Turning her back to the door, Reneta gulped the remaining contents of beer then handed the empty bottle to Wyl and asked, “Trade what?”

“Histories.” Wyl answered. “I tell you about my country - You tell me about yours.”

“-and you don’t think we might have done that anyway?” Reneta asked with a wink. Wyl inhaled slowly and Reneta giggled then stated with a shrug, “I suppose I can accommodate that but first, we need more beer.”

Wyl stood up and stepped in the direction of the door tilting the bottle with a gesture to inquire if she preferred another of the same but Reneta motioned with her head in the direction of the ravine and stated, “No. Not there. This way.”

Wyl glanced into the trees and shrub then asked, “What?”

“A tavern... Music.” Reneta said somewhat under her breath.

Jolting slightly in reaction, Wyl asked, “Why wouldn’t we just use the door? -and I should really get permission from Fae- from my captain.”

“Protocol, Wyl.” Reneta stated with an ominous tone. Wyl exhibited obvious signs of confusion and she explained, “If I say I am going, guards must accompany me, and probably a chaperone, you understand? You could be a spy -- and I’m such an innocent and vulnerable young girl and all... and,” Reneta added in a whisper, looking about cautiously as if someone might overhear, “I am not officially allowed to drink beer. I am technically still a child.”

Wyl stared blankly in a combination of apprehension and fascination. Reneta declared in a whisper, “Tomorrow we die.” Wyl calculated either Fae would sympathize with his plight or the crime would be worth the punishment. A jolting ten-foot drop precipitated a landing below the courtyard on terrain that sloped away sharply and the duo tumbled downhill into a bush. Reneta tugged at Wyl then ran up the slope past the courtyard from which they jumped, to a stone retaining wall at the high end of the ravine. Pulling a hood over her head, presumably as a disguise, Reneta scaled the masonry wall with Wyl behind her, over and onto the sidewalk then continued quickly down a cobbled street lined with buildings packed tightly together. Sturdy and monstrously bulky stone masonry facades dominated the street level but more delicate and ornamental structures loomed overhead, where wooden posts and frames stacked above, and each upper floor level cantilevered out over the last successively from floor to floor, nearer each other proportionate with height and hovering over the streets like trees.

Reneta ducked into deep shadows under a stone archway and inside, made straight for the darkest booth furthest from the door.

“Go get us beer.” Reneta instructed, as she dumped a fistful of coins on the table.

Upon his return, Wyl found Reneta concluding preparations for a smoke then he slid a beer next to her and remarked, “I’m intimidated by your city. Everything here is so big.”

“What is big?” Reneta asked as if such a thing never before occurred to her.

“The buildings,” Wyl replied, “walls and bridges, everything is tall and spectacular.”

Apparently slightly surprised, Reneta asked, "You don't have tall buildings at home?"

"An occasional watchtower and water tower maybe but otherwise, just a second floor is rare and there's no such thing as a third floor." Wyl explained.

"Hmm, no king, no tall buildings." Reneta remarked then delicately suggested, "Tell me about the clothing."

Glancing down at his clothing, Wyl looked back up and asked, "What about it?"

Hesitating to approach the subject delicately, Reneta inquired, "Are they traveling clothes? Uniforms? They're so understated and subtle."

Glancing at his clothing again as if to reconsider, Wyl suddenly concluded, "Oh! You mean plain and dull."

"I don't want to be disrespectful." Reneta stated perhaps slightly embarrassed.

Wyl casually dismissed all apprehensions and informed her, "No Highlander would ever take offense for plain and dull. Most in fact, would be pleased you noticed."

Nodding and flexing her eyebrows with curiosity, Reneta inquired, "What is it about?"

"I've never really thought much about it before." Wyl confessed self-conscious then considering for a moment, he explained, "People in my country generally disapprove of 'flamboyance'. I guess it's just the way it's always been, but now that I've seen other places and things, I'm more curious about it myself, and it's not just clothing either. It's houses and buildings and furniture, rugs, blankets, draperies, glassware and tableware, pretty much everything. Some people are so serious about it, it's like they're competitive, trying to out-plain each other. My neighbor -- well, my parents' neighbor -- he thinks buttons or any kind of flaps or fasteners, or even pockets, are too ornamental and therefore, self-indulgent and flamboyant so he wears pants with drawstrings sewn into the waist, on the inside, so you can't see them, no belt, no loops, no fasteners. He wears boots that pull on, no strings or flaps, and he tucks his pants into the boots so they bag over and you can't see even any hems or edges or cuffs. He used to wear shirts with tiny little pockets for the buttons, to conceal them, but at some point in his life, he decided the overlap of the two sides of the shirt and the visible hem, is too ornamental so now he only wears shirts that pull over from the top, and everything he owns is gray, clothes, boots, rugs, blankets, draperies, everything all gray, and his wife is just like him. These are not just two odd people. Most of the population is like that to some extent. You may have noticed Glendwyn also observes the gray practice. He's probably not quite as serious about it as my neighbor but if you pay attention to it the next time you see him, you'll notice he hardly wears or carries anything that's not gray."

Reneta smiled with fascination and even consciously concealed a degree of amusement then remarked, "That is so... charming... and these half the people you say - They all wear gray?"

"Oh, no, not necessarily gray." Wyl equivocated, "Some people actually reject colors like gray and wear only greens or browns, you know, 'natural' botanical colors. The gray style is a rejection of **all** color and the people that do it think of gray as the closest thing to no color at all. Others may wear only green, for instance, but they're fine with buttons and strings and hems and stuff. It's actually kind of a personal thing that varies between individuals but one thing virtually unanimous is bright 'attractive' colors like red, blue, purple, orange, even yellow. Probably not one single man-made object exists within all the country made of those colors except for maybe... signal flags used by the militia, you know, something with a specific functional purpose."

Reneta stared for a moment nearly speechless as she absorbed the information and Wyl added, "I don't really know how or why it ended up this way. I just know if you ask a number of people, you'll hear the word, 'flamboyant' a number of times."

Reneta nodded then revisiting another subject of prior interest, she suggested, "-and tell me about your Martial."

Wyl shrugged and asked, "What about him?"

"-how he's not a King," Reneta clarified, "and how you have many people who are like Kings. Are they your merchants and aristocracy?"

"My what?" Wyl asked.

With a squint, Reneta repeated, "The people who are like Kings?"

Struggling with the definitions, Wyl replied, "No, I didn't mean the same thing as kings. I mean, you know, people who are involved in..."

"-common interests and affairs?" Reneta suggested.

"Yeah." Wyl responded, thankful for the assistance.

"-and how are the offices of those people determined?" Reneta subsequently inquired.

"Offices?" Wyl repeated then shaking his head, said, "No. They're not- It's not an office, like the Martial."

Reneta attempted to specify her terms more accurately, explaining, "What I am asking is, how do the influential gain positions of influence and authority? Is it hereditary? Are there qualifications?"

Reacting to her questions with some astonishment, Wyl attempted to explain, "There is no authority. The qualification is- It's a sense of responsibility. Sometimes we pressure people into it because we think they're good at it. I guess if you pressure someone into it or they consider it a responsibility, that's what we call 'qualified' enough."

Reneta stared for a moment then asked, "-and that's who decides everything?"

"Decides what?" Wyl asked holding his palms out in frustration.

"Things!" Reneta declared, "Come on, Wyl - Trade with neighbors, market prices, prevailing wages, public utilities, enforcement of the peace, prisons..."

Wyl bit his lip and after a long pause, finally admitted a bit humiliated, "I don't know what half the things are that you just said."

Leaning back, Reneta examined Wyl with intense scrutiny then drank what remained of her beer in three large gulps and slammed the bottle down, commanding, "Go get us more beer, Wyl."

Reneta chugged from her fresh frosty bottle, exhaled heavily with demonstrable satisfaction then stiffened up and blurted, "Do you have money? -back home, I mean, as opposed to in your pocket at this moment."

"We have a coin." Wyl stated with a nod.

"A coin." Reneta repeated in confirmation then inquired, "Okay, what is its value?"

"I'm not sure I understand." Wyl confessed.

"What does it represent?" Reneta specified, "What material thing? What is it worth?"

"Oh," Wyl responded with some relief for a question he thought he understood then responded, "a quarter of an hour."

The answer apparently confused Reneta and she asked, "A quarter of an hour of what?"

Wyl recoiled slightly and responded with obvious amusement, "-of time!"

"Obviously." Reneta concluded then specified, "What I mean is, whose time? What quality of time? Explain it to me as if I were stupid."

“I’m sorry. Okay.” Wyl responded then after pondering for a moment, he attempted to explain, “The coin represents a quarter of an hour of your time or of my time. I do something for you for a quarter of an hour then you give me a coin. Somebody else does something for me for a quarter of an hour then I give them the coin. That’s not literally the way we do it but-”

“-Yes. I understand you are oversimplifying it for me,” Reneta assured him, “but what I am asking is, what about-” Pausing in contemplation, Reneta dug smoking materials from her pockets but Wyl seized the materials then prepared smokes for her while she watched with a gracious smile and drank her beer. “Thank you,” she said after completion of the task then Reneta ignited a smoke and swirled wisps of it with her tongue.

“What about what?” Wyl prompted.

“Oh yes. What about-” Reneta tilted her head and looked carefully into his eyes then inquired, “-function? Someone grows grain, someone else bakes bread, someone else administers those operations. How do you compensate proportionately for function?”

Wyl stared for a moment then confessed, “I don’t understand the question.”

Reneta explained, “The farmer, the baker and the physician; these are different functions of different values. How do you compensate for variable values?”

After carefully considering the question for a moment, Wyl responded, “Um, with time. Time isn’t variable. A quarter hour to me is the same as a quarter hour to you.”

Reneta smiled patiently and informed him, “I think you don’t understand the question. If a quarter hour is the same value to everybody, that doesn’t explain to me how you compensate for the variable value of function. It precludes the possibility of value proportionate to function of greater expertise and knowledge.”

“All right,” Wyl acknowledged, “then I guess you’re right. I guess I don’t understand the question.”

Leaning onto her elbows, Reneta stated calmly, “The farmer, the baker, the physician. The values of these functions are unequal, so I am asking-”

“-Wait. What?” Wyl interrupted.

“The values of functions are unequal.” Reneta repeated over-pronouncing the words.

“What do you mean unequal?” Wyl demanded obviously perplexed by the proposition, “That’s why the quarter hour. The quarter hour makes them equal.”

“No.” Reneta stated insistently then argued, “The quarter hour makes them unequal. The farmer, the baker and the physician perform three very different functions of three very different values. One of them is more difficult than the other two or requires a greater level of expertise. For example, the physician requires more preparation, more expertise, and probably more intelligence than the farmer or the baker-”

“-No it doesn’t!” Wyl declared rather forcefully, “Farming and baking require preparation, expertise and intelligence-”

“-I’m not saying they don’t.” Reneta conceded but then equivocated, “I’m saying the physician requires **more** preparation, expertise and intelligence. If all three trade equal quarter hours, how does the physician collect fair value for the additional preparation, expertise and intelligence?”

“I, uh- wh- I-” Wyl stammered then in frustration, he demanded bluntly, “Who cares?”

Reneta gasped then responded, “Well, the physician for one, I imagine probably cares! After going through all the preparation and exercising the intelligence to gain the expertise to perform so valuable a function, to be compensated the same as the farmer-”

“-then the physician can grow grain if the physician thinks that’s an easier quarter hour.” Wyl remarked, perhaps a bit angrily if not at least defensive then in addition, he asserted, “-and if the farmer doesn’t grow the grain and the baker doesn’t bake the bread then the physician starves to death. Those aren’t valuable functions?”

Reneta paused and gestured apologetically with her hands then with cautiously deliberate calmness and a gentle tone, she explained, “Again, I’m not saying growing grain and baking bread are not valuable. I’m just saying they are not as valuable-”

“-Food is not as valuable as medicine?” Wyl inquired in response.

Reneta leaned back, inhaled deeply and stared at the ceiling for a moment then said, “Maybe I’m using the wrong kind of examples. In your country, you have bakeries?” she subsequently inquired.

“Sure.” Wyl replied.

“-and the owner of the bakery earns compensation greater in value than the baker that works there, right?” Reneta inquired but when Wyl only shook his head, she asked, “Are you saying no one owns the bakery?”

“I’m saying I don’t understand what you mean by ‘own’ the bakery.” Wyl stated somewhat embarrassed by the admission but to his surprise, Reneta did not appear particularly distressed.

“Who builds and maintains the bakery?” Reneta then inquired.

“Whoever wants to bake in it or eat bread from it.” Wyl replied.

Reneta then asked, “What then is the incentive for building the bakery?”

“The incentive for building the bakery is the bakery.” Wyl answered.

Obviously abandoning all argument, Reneta then asked, “In your country, do you recognize the value of the extraordinary thinker and contributor, or the great idea?” Wyl smiled in reaction and she elaborated, “Behind every technological advancement, improvement, comfort or convenience is the great idea. Before the farmer grows the grain, someone extraordinary has the great idea of cultivating the grain. Do you recognize the value of that idea? Do you appreciate that without the great idea from the extraordinary thinker, the farmer never farms?”

“-but wouldn’t that particular ‘great idea’ make that particular ‘extraordinary thinker’ a farmer?” Wyl asked and then with a moment of thought, he inquired in addition, “-and doesn’t every other farmer after that have the same great idea every year?”

“-but without that first great idea from the original extraordinary thinker, none of those other ideas ever happen later.” Reneta contended.

“How do you know that?” Wyl responded then expanded, “If the first ‘thinker’ doesn’t think that first idea, how do you know somebody else doesn’t think that idea the very next day?” Reneta smiled in appreciation of the question and remained silent then Wyl speculated, “Maybe it doesn’t matter who thinks the idea. Maybe the time for the idea just comes along and somebody eventually has to think it one way or another. Using your example of grain, do you really think just one single person came up with the idea of cultivation overnight for no reason? I would think a bunch of smaller steps lead up to something like that. Sure, I suppose somebody has to be ‘first’ to think it but maybe it’s like throwing two rocks up in the air - One of them probably has to land first but they’re both going to land one way or another at about the same time and it doesn’t really matter which one does it first.” Wyl stared at her fascinated by her focus on such technicalities then asked, “Why does it matter so much to you to figure out such obscure minutia?”

“I didn’t say it matters to me.” Reneta admonished, “I’m just asking you questions because you said you wanted to ‘trade histories’. You said you wanted us to tell each other things about our countries so I’m asking you to tell me things about your country.”

“Right.” Wyl conceded, “Yeah, I understand that. I guess I figure it’s maybe about my turn for you to tell me things about your country.”

“That is precisely what I am doing.” Reneta asserted and when Wyl reacted with a quizzical expression, she explained, “Bare with me. Continue answering my questions and I assure you, you will learn as much about my country as I learn about yours.” Wyl nodded somewhat intrigued by the proposition and Reneta continued, “It sounds to me then as if you are saying you do not recognize any special value in the great idea or the extraordinary thinker.”

While Reneta studied him carefully, Wyl stared at her then concluded, “You look like you’re thinking really hard.”

Leaning a bit closer, Reneta looked Wyl in the eye and asked directly, “Do you recognize the difference between your country and my country?”

Wyl mentioned that he already described larger buildings and noted the distinction between King and Martial but then with very little effort, he quickly added, “Coffee and tea, salt and pepper, and lemons, and other stuff. I’ve heard of some of it before but I never appreciated an unfamiliar flavor could taste so amazing. We mine some salt but we don’t use it in small grains like that, on the table for regular use with everything all the time, and we have hot brews very similar to your tea but I’m sure they’re not the same plant, and we have nothing like coffee, but pepper and lemon... I’ve heard of them and even heard descriptions of the flavors but now that I’ve tasted them, I don’t know how to describe it. They’re... maybe the most wonderful things I’ve ever tasted-”

“-That’s not exactly what I’m looking for, Wyl,” Reneta advised, “but you are perhaps a lot closer than you think. By ‘different’, I don’t mean material objects, I mean culturally. I’m talking about the obvious differences in the ways we live and the ways we think. Why don’t you have coffee and tea, salt and pepper or lemon in your country?”

“-because that stuff doesn’t grow there.” Wyl informed her as a routine matter of fact.

“That stuff doesn’t grow here either, Wyl.” Reneta stated, and as Wyl reacted with obvious surprise, she explained, “We mine some salt also but the granular salt you see on our tables is not the salt we mine. That salt comes from deserts far away from here and those other things all come from tropical places in the south where it never snows, and the weather is hot all year. We trade for those things, Wyl.”

“What do you trade?” Wyl inquired.

“We trade some ice,” Reneta explained, “but as I hope you would imagine, ice is not a particularly practical item to transport south. The weather conditions have to be perfect, and there is only so far south ice can travel. We trade some gold, silver and other minerals, we trade pine lumber, we trade some food not native to southern regions, but we also trade finished products. We’re somewhat famous for our clothing, for our ceramics, and for our weaponry.” Wyl stared with fascination then Reneta recalled her initial question, “Do you see the difference yet between your country and my country?”

Wyl rolled his eyes around in consideration then guessed, “Okay, you trade and you have a King? I don’t know. What is the difference?”

Reneta then stated, “No insignia distinguishes the rank of your Martial from you, an apprentice, you both earn the same wage, you don’t understand ownership-”

Wyl countered, "Ownership? No. We understand. We own what is our own."

"I understand that but I am talking about another kind of ownership you do not understand." Reneta advised then inquired, "Did you notice the clothing and jewelry on Ollis and Tanek? You know who I'm talking about? -my advis- the King's advisors, in the red and green formal jackets?"

"Right." Wyl confirmed, "Yes, I remember them."

"Did you pay any attention to any other clothing? -in the street? -in here, right now? Look around." Reneta whispered, leaning her head to point into the room.

Wyl leaned discreetly out of the booth, scanned the room and said, "All right."

Throwing her hands to her sides in exasperation, Reneta raised her eyebrows and commanded, "Say something. Guess."

Wyl sighed then guessed, "Uh, influence? Authority? Heredity? Aris-...?"

"-Aristocracy." Reneta stated in assistance.

Wyl continued, guessing, "Aristocracy? Qualifications? Rank?"

Reneta smiled sarcastically then contended accusatively, "You are only repeating words you heard me say a little while ago but that was not bad, and 'rank' was your best guess. The word I didn't say yet - The word you are looking for, Wyl... is privilege."

"I'm familiar with it." Wyl insisted.

"I'm sure," Reneta conceded, "but maybe it doesn't mean quite the same thing to you. Privilege -- Ollis and Tanek -- don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to disparage them. They're decent enough men, but they're men, with selfish interests like any other -- they occupy positions of privilege and their clothing serves as a proclamation or a demonstration like a costume. Only the wealthiest, the powerful and privileged, can dress like that in my country. In Algath, clothing conveys things about your identity. It declares your occupation, your accumulative wealth, your ancestry - peasant farmer, tradesman, merchant, aristocrat, royalty."

"Royal-" Wyl repeated but halted mid word to examine her more closely then he fully appreciated for the first time that both Reneta and her brother dressed in very ordinary clothing, far more similar to his own than anything worn by her own people around her, and she cut her dark hair unusually short for a girl. Most Highland men including him wore their hair longer than hers and in fact, some might even consider her hairstyle flamboyant. "Aren't you royalty?" Wyl impulsively asked, "What about you?"

"Me?" Reneta responded glancing down at her own clothing, "Oh, I have the wardrobe of royalty, a closet larger than most average homes filled with robes, gowns, furs, lace, wigs, gloves, stockings. Many in the court express considerable disapproval for the way I dress and the way I allow my brother to dress. They consider it 'undignified'. They disapprove of my hairstyle! It is 'unfeminine' and 'common'."

"You are so feminine and uncommon." Wyl argued, emphasizing the word 'so' with some surprise anyone would even say such a thing.

"Thank you." Reneta responded with a blush then she confided, "A long time ago, our people were more like your people than the people you see here now, but under constant pressure from Angora, Sethia and the rest of the world, little by little they chipped away at our values and integrity, and we assimilated. We're a part now of the grand march into the great enterprise of the future, the masses shuffle in and out on a schedule, labor their lives away to produce copious quantities of goods, products and consumables to crate and cart across the known world, for the benefit and betterment of all of mankind."

Wyl stared with an odd expression and even though he sensed Reneta anticipated his thoughts, Reneta nonetheless prompted him, "What is it?"

Remaining silent for a moment, Wyl then stated, "I'm not sure I understand."

"What don't you understand, Wyl?" Reneta inquired.

"The things you just said about trade, schedules, labor, quantities, crates and carts," Wyl explained pausing with a sigh of frustration, "I appreciate the novelty of coffee, pepper and lemon, and like I said, I think the flavors are amazing but what you just described sounds like way too much effort for the mere indulgence of novelty flavors. I don't understand why anyone would do anything so difficult and complicated as all that for nothing more than the novelty of unfamiliar flavors. I don't understand how that makes a reasonable motive."

For the first time since introducing the subject, Reneta appeared surprised by a response and she immediately commented, "It's curious you interpret it in that context."

"What context is that?" Wyl inquired.

"The context of novelty sensations as the assumed motive for those that labor in the enterprise." Reneta explained. In reaction, Wyl flexed his brow sufficiently oblivious to any implications and Reneta clearly understood his reaction as an indication her response answered none of his questions. Leaning close across the table, Reneta then whispered as if sharing a sensitive secret, "That is not the motive for their labors, Wyl." Wyl stared suspiciously and Reneta raised her eyebrows expectantly then inquired, "Do you want to understand the real motive?"

"I always want to understand everything." Wyl confidently declared.

"Really?" Reneta responded with dramatically demonstrable skepticism, "Are you sure? Do you want me to help you understand?"

Wyl hesitated for a moment then confessed, "Okay, now you're making me nervous."

Leaning even closer still across the table, Reneta ominously counseled, "You should be nervous, Wyl -- very nervous. If you're not nervous already, it's probably because you haven't been paying close enough attention."

Draining the last contents of her bottle, Reneta paused then instructed, "Go get more beer, okay?" Collecting the bottles, Wyl headed away from the booth but Reneta called him back urgently and informed him, "Wyl -- just so you understand -- I am not treating you like a servant because I think I am superior. It is because someone might recognize me and I am too young. They won't serve me or they'll maybe even summon the guard, or chase us out of here and ruin our evening."

"I know!" Wyl reassured.

Returning to the booth, Wyl placed a bottle next to Reneta, and she remained stiff and silent for a moment as if deep in thought then advised as he returned to his seat, "If you're serious, about understanding motive, you must play a game with me."

"Game?" Wyl replied with a degree of amusement.

"The truth." Reneta elaborated.

Wyl immediately felt apprehensive as he very rarely spoke openly about his own personal convictions, and 'the truth' accounted as something he felt more comfortable writing in the privacy of his journals rather than discussing aloud. Reneta nonetheless asserted, "You must have played it before even if you didn't call it a game or give it a name - I ask you a question and you talk as fast as you can, even if it amounts to nothing more than babbling nonsense, until I tell you to stop. Want to play?"

Wyl recognized little if any obvious point to the ‘game’ and asked, “How will this-”

“-Just trust me” Reneta insisted, “It will ruin it if I try to explain how. Just play the game and you will understand.” Wyl felt no less discomfort with the idea but Reneta so immediately enamored him that he trusted her like the most intimate confidant and would in fact accommodate anything she asked. Wyl nodded then Reneta looked him in the eyes and stressed, “Remember... talk fast and don’t stop until I say so.”

“Okay.” Wyl agreed.

Rolling her head as if carefully considering her strategy, after a moment Reneta inquired, “What are your dreams, Wyl? If you could have anything you want without any practical or reasonable limitations, what would you wish for?” No one ever before asked Wyl such a question or anything similar in his lifetime and it consequently never before occurred to him to consider a specific inventory. In complete silence, Wyl pondered the question but Reneta disrupted his thoughts urgently instructing, “That won’t work, Wyl. Speak quickly. Speak now.” The degree of difficulty only immediately increased under pressure and Wyl remained silent but Reneta again urged, “Hurry up! Talk!” Opening his mouth, Wyl formed no words then Reneta pushed his shoulders and commanded, “Talk!”

Wyl stammered, “Uh... I’ve always imagined a manor house in the woods-”

“-Go on.” Reneta insisted.

“-a manor house,” Wyl repeated, “-a big manor... on a lakeshore surrounded by the woods with... a nice parlor... big enough for dozens of guests... with sturdy stone walls... and high vaulted ceilings... spacious windows and glass doors... fireplaces... cushioned couches-” Wyl paused and stared at Reneta with an expression that obviously suggested he considered his responses idiotic and pointless.

Reneta laughed and reassured, “You’re doing fine. Just keep talking and don’t think about what you’re saying. It’s just a game. It’s supposed to be stupid.”

Inhaling deeply, Wyl continued, “-oh... fabric draperies... with tasseled drawstrings... chandeliers... thick plush carpets... and a great courtyard... with a wide greenbelt and... flower gardens... sculpted shrubs and birdbaths, all surrounded by tall trees like a garden paradise teeming with wildlife, flora and fauna, and fountains, and artificial pools of crystal water, and a dining hall with a long table that seats dozens, and guest lodgings with private baths, lavish parties that last for days or weeks with banquets and drinking, and music and dancing, and a game room with table games and card tables, and board games and shuttles, and a dance floor, and a service stocked with liqueurs, beers and wines, and a monstrous kitchen with all the best equipment like a fine inn for banquets and feasts, and stables attached to the house, and two dozen horses, and miles of riding trails through the woods, and quarters for cooks and gardeners and-”

“-Stop!” Reneta commanded abruptly.

Wyl actually felt somewhat exhilarated by the exercise and Reneta leaned back deliberating for some time then proposed, “What I think I hear you saying Wyl, is, if you could have anything you want... you would live like a King.”

Wyl flexed his forehead in consideration then after some time he slowly widened his eyes as if with a revelation and he inquired, “Is that how kings live?”

Reneta turned her eyes down toward the table, slowly closed them then after a moment of silence, she stated almost reluctantly and barely audibly, “Yes.”

Assembling all the hints and clues, Wyl stared at Reneta then with an expression of surprise, he asked, “Is that how... you... live?”

Turning her head, Reneta stared vacantly then in apparent humiliation, she replied as if confessing, “The room you are staying in, the suite with the private baths and the parlor, those are ‘my’ guest lodgings. The room we all met in with the round table is but one of ‘my’ dining halls. The courtyard and the ravine we ran through is a part of ‘my’ gardens. The men and women that served you are ‘my’ cooks and wait staff.” Focusing her attention on Wyl, Reneta studied him intently for a moment then firmly stated, “Your dreams are also reality, Wyl... for **me**... but not for you.” Wyl stared dumbfounded and struggled to comprehend how such a fantasy could possibly constitute any reality. As if anticipating his thought, Reneta nodded almost imperceptibly, tilted her head and in a nearly frightening whisper, she inquired, “Are you ready for your next question, Wyl?”

Jolting slightly, Wyl protested, “Next? You never said-”

“-What would you kill and die for, Wyl?” Reneta asked bluntly in a nearly accusative tone, “Would you die for your country? Would you kill for your dreams?”

The tone confused Wyl and the sudden perhaps even presumptive harshness of her questions caught him entirely unprepared but most of all, he did not care for the apparent suggestion. “I don’t like this now and I don’t want to play anymore.” Wyl stated firmly.

“Don’t misunderstand me.” Reneta replied with a somewhat remorseful and disarming demeanor, “I’m not trying to expose some deficiency in you. It’s not about you, Wyl. Remember the subject... -- **motive** -- ... You wanted to understand. You wanted me to help you understand. Remember? That was the point of the game. Do you understand now? Do you understand motive?”

Wyl considered for a moment then attempted to argue, “Just because I describe those things, that doesn’t mean-”

“-Yes it does, Wyl.” Reneta forcefully countered, “It means everything. No, no one would ever do anything so difficult or complicated for something so trivial as novelty... but they would make someone else do it for them... for something so substantial as the fulfillment of their wishes and dreams. That is why someone would go so far out of their way to do something so complicated... because privilege, palace, treasure, fabulous riches, servant and slave are complicated things to arrange. You may believe you would never kill for those things and maybe you wouldn’t but you have never been tempted by opportunity, and you will never know for sure until tempted by opportunity or until you know yourself well enough to know better.” In a whisper with a stark and challenging expression, Reneta advised, “Tomorrow... the Silver Tongue will knock upon my door... If it was your door and if you were Martial and it was up to you, and all that stood between you and the fulfillment of your every wish and dream was my interference-”

“-Please stop this.” Wyl pleaded.

Reneta acknowledged his distress with a sympathetic expression but admonished Wyl nonetheless, “Be cautious for what you wish, Wyl. Be cautious of what you dream.” Reneta stared into his eyes as his mind raced to remediate his wishes and dreams, and Wyl told himself if only he thought about it long enough, surely he might propose a perfectly reasonable method by which he may possess those things he enumerated without all that complicated violence and slavery, and perhaps even in short order had Reneta not disrupted his concentration nudging his hand to instruct him, “Go get us more beer now, Wyl. Beer makes violence and slavery so much more palatable, doesn’t it?” Reneta inquired with a childlike innocent tone.

Wyl placed a fresh bottle in front of Reneta as he returned to his seat.

Reneta savored a long draught then smacked her lips and declared, “Ah... That’s better, isn’t it?” Wyl sat quietly and in fact pouted perhaps just a bit while nursing his beer. Evidently distracted for a moment by a fresh cold drink, Reneta refocused her attention on Wyl, smiled compassionately then reassuringly insisted, “I am sorry if I hurt your feelings, Wyl, but it was a convincing demonstration, was it not? I’m surprised by the things you dream about and so I know I have given you something worth considering.” Resting her hand on his, Reneta asserted with sincere sensitivity, “When we dream of idle pleasure, Wyl, the service of attendants and concentrations of material in excess of anything we could ever possibly produce by our own merit in one lifetime, what we really dream of is... slaves...” Opening her eyes wide, Reneta pronounced the word with excruciating clarity, and Wyl cringed in reaction. Even though Wyl may have found some of the local terminology a bit esoteric, he knew no equivocation for that particular word. Reneta then explained in addition, “In my country, we apply what most consider complimentary sounding words such as determination, ambition, enterprise, persistence, tenacity, vision and dreams... We treat them not so much like words but like names, sacred and honorable attributes, divine manifestations, but no matter the words my ears hear, what my eyes see is the many laboring their lives away for nothing, for the few that live like Kings. What my eyes see is the material condition of slavery even despite all the optimistic sentimentally appealing names.”

Wyl exhibited genuine shock to hear Reneta criticize her own country - A country in which she played the role of virtual king and presumably exercised a considerable degree of control over conditions.

Perhaps Reneta anticipated his thoughts but in any event, she remarked, “With anyone from my country, I could never have played that game or taught that lesson. They would laugh in my face. They would tell me I am predictably dramatic and hysterical, and this at last is the difference between my country and your country, Wyl... My country could never produce one as innocent as you.” she concluded with absolute finality then laced her fingers together under her chin and studied him, shook her head slightly and more wondering aloud than asking directly, inquired, “Why would you dream that which you have come here to oppose? The Silver Tongue is a man of true visions and dreams. He always presents opportunity everywhere he goes. Commerce, initiative, incentive and prosperity - He brings us the world of our dreams and all we have to do to make our dreams real is believe. What dreams are those, Wyl? What treat has the Silver Tongue brought with him this time? He is here to kill for his dreams.”

Wyl shivered and breathed unsteadily while Reneta stared calmly, drank her beer and recalled, “Orna told me once about people from somewhere out west. Sanctuaries, she calls them. She says they are the people that escaped time... Is that who you are, Wyl? Are you the people from the sanctuaries that escaped time?”

Wyl observed an obvious affection between Reneta and Orna but her statements and questions clearly exposed some curious circumstances - A witch talked about the Highlands to some stranger in the distant east and it felt to Wyl like a betrayal, like something he ought to tell Glendwyn. “What does that mean? Escaped time?” Wyl asked, in a near whisper.

Reneta remained silent and expressionless as if she perhaps sensed his suspicions. “Are you ready for another game?” she suddenly asked almost playfully.

“No.” Wyl immediately and firmly asserted.

“This one is easy for you.” Reneta argued, “All you have to do is listen. I tell you something about yourself, something I think you don’t even know, my best guess then you judge me... and determine the accuracy of my guesses.”

“No. I don’t want to play.” Wyl insisted quite firmly.

“Walk away if you don’t like it.” Reneta instructed as if in continuation of her newfound playful attitude.

Wyl sighed and stared at the table simply reluctant to part with her then Reneta smiled a bit sarcastically and explained, “It’s about your clothing and other things, all things ‘plain and dull’. These are a declaration, just like our clothing here, but your declarations do not identify status or accomplishment. They are a declaration of humility, equality and intention. It is a denunciation of motive and ambition. You recognize no ownership beyond obvious practical necessity. You exchange a coin for goods and services, but only as a convenience, at a fixed absolute value without potential for profit. You don’t know what debts or investments are - There are no manors in your country, the manors of which you dream, are there, Wyl? Those manors come from faerie tales and accounts of foreign places. The most extravagant eccentric people in your country are the ones with the least, aren’t they? -the smallest house, the smallest yard, the fewest possessions, the dullest clothes. They are the most ambitious among you, proud and demonstrative of their humility, eager to flaunt, to proclaim their accomplishment, or even better still, their lack thereof. Am I getting warm?”

Wyl shifted on his bench with a hint of discomfort but offered no response.

With a sly smile and a twitch of her eyebrows, Reneta leaned close and firmly concluded, “**That**... is how you have escaped time, Wyl. That is what it means. How can you be a part of something so rare and exceptional, and be so detached and uncommitted? Why am I explaining these things to you? You should be explaining these things to me. I am the spoiled princess in my ivory tower oblivious to the suffering of the humble masses laboring in support of my extravagant privilege, and you are the noble savage from the enlightened and egalitarian sanctuary. You should be teaching me lessons tonight, Wyl. I have so much to learn from you.” The assertions embarrassed Wyl and he felt like a bit of a disappointment but Reneta glanced around her as if to share a secret and confirm no one might overhear then continued discretely, “You are in the real world now, Wyl... the other world. Consider your words and actions with great caution here. Your first charitable impulse is your most hazardous deficiency - Remorseless motive and ambition your best defense.” Pressing her hand to her mouth, Reneta shrank into her seat and in a whisper, she asked, “Why did she bring you here? Why would she expose you to this world?”

So much to consider so suddenly all at once caused Wyl insurmountable contemplation and he ultimately identified the one, always at the center of every puzzle then demanded, “Who is she? What is she? What do you know?”

Reneta reacted almost comically, inquiring, “What are you talking about?”

“What do you know about her?” Wyl persisted.

Apparently recognizing Orna as the subject of his inquiry, Reneta shook her head and she again inquired, “Why are you asking me this?”

“-because you know something.” Wyl insisted, “You said, ‘escaped time’ - Fae said, ‘fractured histories’. What fracture is she in my history? Why are we both familiar with her even over so great a distance? Why did you say she ‘brought’ us here?”

“It’s an expression.” Reneta argued, rolling her eyes suggesting he overreacted, “She was here first... yesterday... You were following her, right?”

“That’s not what you meant.” Wyl concluded in an accusative tone.

“Not what I mean-” Reneta exhorted with some surprise over his presumption, “How do you know what I meant? Why are you changing the subject?”

“Changing the subject?” Wyl repeated then leaning on his elbows, he stated assertively, “She is always the subject. Talking about her is never a change of subject because one way or another, she always somehow has something to do with every subject. What do you know?” Wyl stubbornly repeated.

“Stop it, Wyl. You’re making a fool of yourself.” Reneta countered defensively, “I’m not hiding any secrets from you. She is who she is.”

“Oh, so we’re going to pretend about that too, then?” Wyl mocked her earlier insistence on honesty without pretense, “You like games, Reneta? It’s about time it was my turn, don’t you think? Here’s my game. I call it, ‘let’s review all the bullshit Reneta says and see if she’s really willing to live with it’.”

“Wyl!” Reneta exclaimed with surprise for his assertiveness.

“Who didn’t want to pretend? Who wanted to know ‘the truth’?” Wyl demanded, “Who wanted to make best guesses? Who said, tomorrow we die? What does that mean? It’s obvious, right? You are obviously intelligent, even if based on nothing more than your age but you’ve backed yourself into a corner on this, admit it, you can’t retreat from the challenge now without looking like a hypocrite. You have to play my game now. Come on, Reneta, I’ve had my daily allowance of humiliation. Humor me.”

Reneta leaned back and lit a smoke glaring at Wyl, but the corners of her lips curled up, betraying an inhibited smile and she conceded, “Good for you, Wyl. Splendid. Why don’t you go get us more beer now so you can artificially prolong the time you have to gloat and congratulate yourself for your intellectual victories, and when you return, I will reward your accomplishments and divulge all the secrets of the cosmos.”

“All right. Fine.” Wyl taunted playfully as he rose from the booth.

Returning with two bottles, Wyl slid back onto his bench then stared at Reneta while they both remained silent for some time nursing their beers.

Apprehensive not to appear too uninformed or too curious, Wyl stalled for a moment plotting and gathering his resolve while Reneta by all appearances waited patiently then cautiously, Wyl finally asked, “Have you never noticed, when you touch her or even just stand near her and concentrate, you might feel... sensations? -sounds? -maybe even twinkling lights?”

Reneta sat motionless and stared for a considerable time then despite the protracted contemplation, she simply and defiantly responded, “So?”

Nearly laughing, Wyl asked, “-so... you have a thought? -a truth? -a guess?”

Wyl anticipated the game turned out far more demanding a challenge than Reneta might have expected but she folded her arms, froze motionless and stared for some time again then finally responded, “She is-” and exhaled in frustration then flexed and contorted her lips for a moment desperately attempting to force out some word, any word, finally settling on, “charismatic.”

Wyl laughed in a short burst punctuated with a snort then mocked, “She’s charismatic? Well, that’s not really all that mysterious after all, is it? That’s good, Reneta. Thanks for clearing that all up for me-”

“-Maybe,” Reneta further speculated working to rehabilitate the credibility of her theory, “her fragrance contains some... toxin and... that causes those things on contact? ...-or even indirectly... in the air?”

Wyl specifically mentioned sensations that might occur in proximity as opposed to direct contact and ‘in the air’ sufficiently addressed as much as an issue thus salvaging the speculative theory. Nodding somewhat impressed, Wyl then argued, “-but wouldn’t she feel like that too, then? -all the time?”

“How do you know she doesn’t?” Reneta countered with obvious satisfaction she discounted the challenge then guessed, “Maybe she’s developed an immunity?”

Wyl smiled and shook subtly from silent laughter then inquired, “How far are you willing to go with this?” and leaning closer, he demanded, “What about the arrow? We all saw that. What saved her? Charisma? Immunity? Luck?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Reneta declared, “I don’t care! It just happened. She’s alive. That’s all I care about, and what did we see anyway? Think about what you’re saying - In all the history of humanity, no one single man has ever survived injury from an arrow? It’s never happened before?” In reinforcement, Reneta advised, “I once saw a man survive a shot in the head by an arrow! How much more improbable was that?”

“It still happened and her immediate recovery is nothing short of miraculous.” Wyl insisted, “-and what about all that stuff she carries in her bag? Have you ever seen inside there? She’s got all these lotions and potions. She’s got something for everything. She gets hurt and she rubs stuff on her, wraps it up then all the sudden, she’s completely healed and even her fragrance since you mentioned it... I’ve never smelled anything like it before and it’s... like... magical! It’s intoxicating-”

Reneta almost leapt to her feet with excitement for the opportunity to speak, finally with some authority, in defense of the enigmatic Orna, asserting, “Yes, Wyl, I have seen inside her bag and I know what she carries in it. I have emptied her bag out on my bed and carefully inspected all its contents.” Wyl jolted slightly in reaction and opened his mouth but before he spoke, Reneta advised, “It’s... a girl thing.” and Wyl closed his mouth then nodded in concession without further question or comment. Reneta then informed him, “Most of it comes from right here, some of it from me personally. All those ‘lotions and potions’ come from our physicians or maybe some of it from Angora, but they are all medicinal substances commonly available right here -- and the fragrance as well. It contains jasmine and other botanicals, exotic plants evidently not native to your country, and that is why you have never smelled anything like it.”

“No.” Wyl insisted, “but-”

“-Look, Wyl,” Reneta pled reaching for his hand and looking Wyl in the eye, “if it all seems so incredible, why can’t you just tell yourself it’s a miracle? Stranger things have happened. What do you think we are going to conclude? You and I sitting here talking are never going to prove her fragrance or her potions are magic or that she possess supernatural healing powers-”

“-Why not?” Wyl challenged, “We don’t have to prove it to anyone else, just ourselves. How much proof do we need? Why is it so difficult to just admit the truth about our experiences with her? It’s the truth no matter how improbable. She’s not just another man like the rest of us - She’s something different - She’s something... extraordinary-”

Her jaw dropped open then Reneta declared, “Oh, Wyl... You’re in love with her.”

Recoiling slightly, Wyl shook his head then declared unequivocally, “No I’m not.”

Reneta sighed, shook her head then stated flatly, “-and nothing proves it more convincingly than that.”

“Than what?” Wyl demanded.

“-than the unequivocal declaration.” Reneta contended.

“What?” Wyl exclaimed incredulous.

“Yes.” Reneta insisted then added as an example, “That is why I trust Tanek more than Ollis. Ollis is always very agreeable to popular opinion as if he is unwilling to admit anything potentially controversial about himself - Tanek is defiant. He never cares how insulting or unflattering any suspicion and will argue merit and principle until he faints from exhaustion without ever defending himself or even denying any allegation.”

Wyl smirked and retorted, “Maybe he’s just aware of your stupid witticism and he’s tricking you. It doesn’t mean anything, and don’t change the subject. I’m not done. I still have questions for you.”

“Really?” Reneta taunted as she drank from her bottle.

“How long have you known her?” Wyl inquired, resuming his inquisition.

“Still not giving up?” Reneta inquired with a smile, “-even though your secret love has been exposed?”

“How long have you known her?” Wyl repeated impatiently.

Exhaling with a moan after a deep breath, Reneta replied, “As long as I can remember.”

“How long is that?” Wyl asked, “How old are you?”

“I am sixteen.” Reneta answered growing somewhat agitated, “I can remember her from when I was, maybe four?”

“So, more than ten years?” Wyl equivocated.

“I suppose, just barely.” Reneta conceded.

“-and you don’t think it perhaps a bit curious that she is about our age, now, but she wasn’t ten years younger ten years ago?” Wyl asked, flexing his eyebrows as if Reneta should easily appreciate the obvious nature of the evidence.

Reacting as if she ate something insufferably bitter, Reneta inquired, “What on earth would make you leap to that conclusion?”

“She looks our age.” Wyl asserted, “She-”

“-Oh! Well,” Reneta mocked, “why didn’t you say so sooner? You could have avoided all this argument. That has to be the most convincing and indisputable evidence of all!”

“No.” Wyl objected, “-give or take ten years maybe- Listen, Fae said he knew her fifteen years ago and my neighbor said he saw her twenty years before that-”

“-Oh, Wyl, stop it now.” Reneta pleaded, “Can’t you hear yourself?” As if concerned over his physical condition, Reneta leveled her eyes and counseled, “The reason no one wants to humor you with this is because all of these things are meaningless, and let’s pretend we’re only talking about me and my perspective. Your neighbor and Fae -- let’s assume they have functional mental capacities and no reason to perpetrate a hoax -- has it not occurred to you they could be simply honestly mistaken? Your testimonials have the least credibility of all. I think my toxins are a far superior explanation, and, ‘she looks our age’? Give or take ten years? Ten years is all we need to give or take to render that theory stupid. Everything else, charisma, toxins, luck, miracles - All of these things are far more believable and more convincing than... wherever it is you think you are going with this.

Just admit it - You’re in love with her... and that is why you feel ‘sensations’. That is why you are so fascinated and can’t stop thinking about her.”

Wyl sighed in exasperation as Reneta turned her head sideways slightly, examined him from the corners of her eyes and with a sympathetic expression, confided almost as if a confession, "I understand. I love her too. She is my guardian angel, my protector and my champion. I admit I feel these sensations also. I am not saying you are imagining things - I am just saying you are misinterpreting your feelings. I simply believe she is in fact a truly extraordinary human among ordinary humans and because of that, my love for her feels like something... magic."

Wyl at last accepted the explanations as reasonable and plausible, at the very least in comparison to his explanations and as he opened his mouth to comment, Reneta motioned to silence him then instructed, "Finish your beer. I will take you on a tour of the city for a few hours. I have to be somewhere in a while and I'll take you with me now that I understand you better. You'll be glad I brought you with me."

Departing the tavern, Reneta led Wyl through the streets while he admired the impressive stature and ornamentation of the city. A chilled breeze whistled in the bare branches and pine needles accompanied by a hint of the first bloom of spring. Walking through the cavernous streets for some time, in the light of oil lamps and dimly lit windows, Reneta eventually guided Wyl on another adventure through the royal gardens scaling several walls and wandering along a series of outdoor staircases and balconies along the way then eventually sneaking back into the palace through a window three floors over the grade. Navigating a number of dark corridors to a small storage room on a high floor, Reneta approached a set of bypassing doors that appeared to Wyl the opening to a closet but revealed a circular stair, which the pair ascended to a small balcony under a cone shaped roof with a commanding view over the rooftops.

In the great field outside the city wall under moonlight, distant figures of beastly men swarmed in masses around hundreds of bonfires. A dim glow illuminated the few houses and mills on the expanse and smoke billowed from the chimneys. Remote hints of laughter and shouts echoed on the breeze while trains of wagons and other dark shapes trickled through the gap in the hills at the far end of the field. No place remained yet to run and no hope to hold onto, that Orna might still be wrong as the army she predicted in fact arrived just as she predicted, and set up camp on the very doorstep of the city.

"I'm scared." Wyl whispered, "Aren't you scared?"

"Of course I'm scared." Reneta shamelessly admitted, "I've been scared for a long time. I've been paying attention." Reneta placed her hand on his shoulder as Wyl leaned near then they held each other tight while in all likelihood his need for comfort accounted greater even though the comfort he drew accounted the lesser.

A guard finally confronted the two delinquents at the entrance to the tunnel in the basement and he examined Reneta skeptically then admonished, "I have heard several complaints about you this evening, Miss. I should probably take you into custody."

With a warm smile as she passed, Reneta held Wyl by his hand as the darkness of the tunnel enveloped them interrupted only by the light from an occasional candle. The tunnel extended for what Wyl guessed a mile until finally a glow brighter than a single candle illuminated the space ahead in a broader dim orange where two large metal doors punctuated the end of the tunnel and two guards sat there on stools, each with a dim lamp overhead in a holder on the wall. Both guards stirred urgently to their feet in a formal greeting then offered the stools to Reneta and her guest but Reneta forcefully admonished them to return to their seats and conduct themselves informally.

Reneta and Wyl leaned on the clammy block wall for some time then a heavy thud of plodding horse hooves echoed through the tunnel gradually ascending in volume until two shadowy figures loomed above in saddles like giants in the low and narrow confines. As the riders halted their mounts but a few paces from the doors, the lamplight illuminated a serious and grim looking man with a thin dark moustache and black hair that hung straight down to his breast while alongside him rode Orna in her red garment with skin glittering red in the dull glow.

“A moment please?” Orna whispered as she slid from her horse then stepped toward Reneta and resting forearms upon her shoulders, looked up at Reneta and whispered, “No matter what happens, expect me with absolute certainty. Make all your decisions based on that belief. I will be at least one week but less than two. I will try to send word back in advance but you will most likely have to trust and wait. Be strong.” Orna then kissed Reneta on her cheek and Reneta wept as they embraced.

As Orna turned toward her horse, Wyl whispered, “Be careful, Orna.”

Perhaps a bit rushed, Orna turned and embraced Wyl in a slightly awkward but gracious gesture then said, “You be careful also, Wylmaer.”

Slipping back up onto her horse, Orna adjusted herself then nodded to the guards, one of whom whispered, “You may encounter some resistance. They’re not very organized and might not be prepared for anything more than a random wild shot but we’re sure at least a few of them are crawling around out there.”

Both Orna and her companion nodded then the guards placed their hands on the door mechanisms and extinguished their lamps plunging the tunnel into complete darkness. Midnight blue suddenly glowed from a narrow slot in the blackness as a guard opened a peephole then exchanged a brief series of birdcall whistles with counterparts somewhere outside and a tense moment followed as the horses snorted and scratched restlessly at the dirt floor. “Go!” Orna barked then the doors opened suddenly and swiftly with a soft hissing sound barely audible, revealing outside, a vague world of midnight blue and black shadowy shapes as the horses jolted and burst out the opening, kicking dirt back into the tunnel. In an instant, the two riders hurdled down the path at full speed with a sound thunderous in the quiet breeze, and the guards let the doors linger open as the sound of thumping hooves faded. One or two muffled distant shouts rang out in the woods and an anxious silence followed but after the silence sustained for a convincing duration, the guards closed the doors and relit their lamps.

Again holding Wyl by a hand, Reneta led him out of the tunnel then through dim quiet hallways and stairwells in silence, until they stepped out a doorway and Wyl recognized the guest suite. “I trust you can find your room from here?” Reneta whispered.

“Yes.” Wyl answered then added, “Thank you for everything. The trip here was worth it just to know you, even if only for one single evening.”

Reneta smiled perhaps a bit self-conscious then softly replied, “Thank you.”

Wyl kissed her and they held in an embrace for a moment then Reneta turned and said, “Good night.” as she made off down the stairs.

“We never did trade histories.” Wyl called down in a whispered shout.

“Maybe tomorrow.” Reneta replied.

“But... tomorrow we die.” Wyl reminded her.

“It’s just an expression, Wyl. Don’t take everything so literally.” Reneta remarked, her voice echoing in the stairwell chamber accompanied by the patter of her feet on the steps.